

Back Again, Back Again: Truth and Consequence

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode fourteen: Truth and Consequences.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Ilyaas: Cassian was not happy. This was blatantly obvious. He was making the disgruntled face he did when I beat him in the stupid games we played, except this time it was overlayed with anger and -- fear, rather than just annoyance.

Also, there were guards with him.

Ilyaas, he said, and it turned more into worry than anger. I opened my mouth, ready for bullshit or truth or something in between, but he cut me off before I could make a story. *I've already called the guards. They're out looking for you.*

Not *the two of you*. You. Just me. Rhia didn't flinch -- her head was tucked down nearly to her chest. She didn't look like

the girl I'd spent every night running around with or the girl that joked with Cassian. She looked like -- a servant. She was so much more than that. *I've been here for half an hour.*

You haven't --

Told my mother? Who chose my dresses and made me know the weight of my position at dinner and made sure I knew she was in charge. I woke the power and I fought for her, but she was the ruler -- that was just it. She was the ruler. And she could make things worse for me. I had a sword but barely knew how to swing it, I had magic that I hadn't figured out how to use beyond that first accidental time, disappearing a girl to Somewhere Else, capitalized for emphasis. He grimaced. *I did.*

That was -- It hurt, I won't lie. *Where could I have gone that I wouldn't come back from? Where else do I know?*

Where did you go? He asked. Prying.

I -- Rhia didn't lift her head. And she looked small and her getting in trouble for something that was only a problem because I'd done it was -- not something I wanted to face. I didn't want to see it in her face, have her pull away because she was afraid.

We'd become friends, without pretense or position or anything else. She didn't expect me to save or raze this world, and, selfishly, I cared most about not losing that. Not losing

-- ease. Not losing moonlight and rooftops and jokes and words learned in secret.

So I lied and told a story. I said it was my fault, that I had wanted to go out and ran away and that Rhia had had no choice but to go after me. I left out our moonlight roof spelunking and the letters she'd taught me -- because I wasn't stupid -- but told him that I hadn't gotten far before Rhia convinced me to go back. The tavern didn't exist. It was just half a walk in the woods before we clambered in through my window.

It was that stupid speech, I told him. I couldn't remember it all and I got bored and restless and wanted to see something else. I've been stuck for weeks.

He called back the guards. Eight had been sent after me, and they all crowded into my room, staring. I didn't know what to do, but they were all looking at me. Between me and Cassian.

She's here, he finally said, in Rhysean. Someone get my mother.

Rhia still hadn't moved. And she certainly didn't look up when the queen swept in seconds after that. She was... somewhere between concern and anger, physically, but her eyes were flashing with a dangerous sort of light.

Where did you go? She snapped.

For a walk, I said, meeting her eyes. I kept my voice soft, trying to be a perfect little soldier. I was bored.

For a second I thought she would slap me. But then, she lowered her hand back down and leveled me with a long, even stare. *It's not safe, she said finally. There are those out there who would want to kill you.*

Like the girl who stabbed me? I asked. Though I healed fast, it left a nasty scar, like stitches that hadn't gone in quite right. The wound was raised and red and crooked, two and a half inches long and not far from the top of my left lung. I used to sit and rub at it, nervous habit that simply became habit after too many years. I still do, even though it's not there.

She pursed her lips. *Like her. Like her group. They won't be happy until one of their own sits on the throne.*

It was true that they hadn't seemed happy earlier that night.

She turned then to Rhia. *And where were you?*

She tried to stop me, I supplied.

I didn't ask you, she snapped. *Menstrana de. Answer me.* Since the queen had swept in the four of us had spoken in nothing but English. The guards that crowded the room watched with interest, eyes going back and forth like they were watching

a game, even though beyond the queen's harsh tone they wouldn't have had an idea of what was being said.

Rhia raised up her head and, eyes trained somewhere to the left of the queen's face, answered, *with the vatakina eligida*.

The queen did slap her. Fast, like a snake, and her hand was back at her side before any of us could say anything to protest. I was shocked silent. The look Rhia was giving me was saying not to interfere, not to make it worse, but one part of me wanted to disappear the queen too and the other part wanted to keep my mouth shut because I really didn't want to get hurt.

Don't let it happen again.

The queen considered us for a long minute before sweeping back out. Cassian leveled me a long stare. *I would've gone with you*, he said, finally. *If you had asked, I'd have followed you anywhere*. And he, too, made to leave, pausing in the doorway and turning back. Something like resolve sat in his eyes. *I'll see you in an hour*, he said. *For training*.

And he, too, was gone, taking the guards with him.

Except for one -- who stayed outside the door. To keep us in, not to keep others out, as it turned out. A new feature.

Rhia and I stood in silence for several minutes before she whispered an *I'm sorry*, so small I almost missed it.

She unfroze, then, and pulled a set of sparring clothes from the wardrobe and let my hair out of its braids -- not that they'd done much good, after all.

As I stared at her through the mirror, her cheek red, all I could think was, *you shouldn't have to be sorry.*

That was the day I learned about truth and consequence. Or -- lies and consequence. And classism and how no one is quite as good as they seem and, most of all, what the queen really was.

When I got back from my run, bone-tired but Cassian refusing to let me stop, there was a new lock on my window. I didn't have the key, and neither did Rhia.

Truth or consequence. Veritad et consequentia.

(Silence)

I know it's stupid, but I couldn't sleep last night. It was the first night since I've gotten back that I wasn't asleep before midnight. I know that it's some kind of stupid superstition I created in the hopes of sending myself home, but I can't shake the sick feeling in my gut that now I won't get back. Two AM meant I was exhausted for school -- what eight hours of sleep on a normal sleep schedule will do for you -- but that doesn't matter as much as that I'm scared the magic will never come back. That I'll never see Rhysea again.

That's my truth. Now I'll face the consequence.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

Abigail, as the outro: Back Again, Back Again is written and produced by me, Abigail Eliza. If you'd like to hear more about the show, visit us on Twitter, Instagram, or Tumblr @backagainpodcast or on Tik Tok @abigailelizawrites. Our outro music is Nightingales by Pierce Murphy from the album To Japan, and is licensed under an Attribution License. The song was retrieved from FreeMusicArchive.org. Visit the description of this episode for full copyright information and a link to the page. Sound effect attribution, similarly, can be found in the episode description.

If you've made it this far, thanks for sticking around. You are important in this world and have a role no one else can fill. You are loved. I hope you have a wonderful day.